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ABSTRACT

Parents encourage their children to follow paths they themselves find vicariously satisfying, perpetuating a family cycle of deferred dreams. What parents must do to free their children from the cycle of hand-me-down dreams is first to free themselves. To do so, they have to examine how happy they are with their own career decisions. Understanding the linkage between example and influence is critical to breaking the cycle of hand-me-down dreams. It points parents toward self-awareness as the single most important factor in their children's freedom. This paper describes why parents have trouble seeing their influence clearly. The telltale signs of hand-me-down dreams run amok are listed. "Dual vision," which links the past with the future, is defined and counselors are urged to encourage parents to develop this. (MKA)

Loving Them as They Are: Helping Parents Break the Cycle of Hand-Me-Down Dreams

by

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Loving Them As They Are: Helping Parents Break the Cycle Of Hand-Me-Down Dreams

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PUBLICATION

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Since writing *Hand-Me-Down Dreams: How Families Influence Our Career Paths* (NY:Three Rivers Press, 2000), I've given workshops around the country describing how careers are influenced by the emotional work we do within our families while growing up. We adopt these "jobs" not because our parents explicitly ask us to, but because as children we are exquisitely attuned to detect what our parents want from us, even if what they *say* they want is the opposite of what we know intuitively is true.

I expected participants to be most interested in applying these insights to their own career decisions — and of course, people *are*. But the **first** question I was always asked was from parents: "*What can I do to make sure my children are **free** to follow their own dreams?*" Ironically, I was also frequently asked, in weary tones, by counselors who work in school settings, "*How can I help parents to stop being **overly involved** with their children's lives?*"

Their children's future happiness feels more urgent to many parents than happiness with their own. Parents are eager to identify actions they can take *for* their children to ensure such happiness. But the truth is that *their satisfaction* with life and their children's *satisfaction* in the future are inextricably linked. Albert Schweitzer once said that example isn't the *main* thing in influencing others; it's the *only* thing. Parents who tolerate less than fulfilling careers, hoping that the next generation will do better, actually teach their children to do the same. They will encourage their children to follow paths they themselves find vicariously satisfying, which perpetuates a family cycle of deferred dreams. What parents must do to free their children from the cycle of hand-me-down dreams is first to free themselves. To do so, they have to examine how happy they are with their *own* career decisions.

Understanding the linkage between *example* and *influence* is critical to breaking the cycle of hand-me-down dreams. It points parents toward *self-awareness* as the single most important factor in their children's freedom. It reveals that being "overly involved" with their children's lives can be a misguided substitute for working on the happiness of their own.

Next, I'll describe why parents have trouble seeing their influence clearly. I'll list the telltale signs of *hand-me-down dreams* run amok. And I'll define the "dual vision" counselors can encourage parents to develop linking past with present.

"Be Everything I Wasn't – and Everything I Am"

Most parents intuitively understand that their hopes and dreams affect children. They've experienced what a character in August Wilson's play *Fences* says of a father and son: "Your daddy wanted you to be everything he *wasn't*... and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he *was*." We spend years of adulthood discerning the difference between living up or

down to our parents' expectations, on the one hand, and living our lives as the distinct individuals we really are, on the other.

Many parents, however, get confused when they try to see their *own* influences on their children. It's like twisting your head to see your back in a mirror. Glimpses are fleeting and blurred. Parents are too close and too conflicted to see these emotionally charged relationships clearly. Their *desire* for their child to develop in a particular way bumps against their *belief* that they "should" love a child unconditionally. Parents believe they should *observe* and *support* their children's interests, not *mold or pressure* children to fulfill their own wishes and dreams. Ironically, their desire to live up to this ideal of selfless parenting impedes their ability to admit that **no parent ever has, nor could they do so**. If parents can not accept that they are *communicating* expectations to children, they will not be able to admit what they are, to see them in action, or to assess whether they are helping or hindering their children.

When a child's talent or behavior accords with what they wish for, parents are tempted to describe it as a blessing of nature, not something they have cultivated and rewarded (e.g., "Jessica, like all girls, is naturally neater than her brother Ed, who's a slob like all boys." "Jed was born with the gift of gab; he loves to debate his lawyer father.") Even problem behaviors may be viewed as signs of unusual giftedness that call for "special" understanding and treatment (e.g., "Gordie isn't aggressive; he's just livelier and more energetic than other kids." "Cindy doesn't have tantrums, she's strong willed and verbal."). Surely, parents should be allowed to celebrate their children's "natural" gifts! Celebration isn't influence. Right?

On the other hand, when children's behavior disappoints them, parents tend to view it as a hazard (usually described as a "worry") that calls for intervening "nurture" — of the nudging or protective kind — on the child's behalf (e.g., "Gordie is naturally lazy, and needs to play football for the discipline." "Cindy is so bookish, she needs to be pushed to play with other children or she'll be seen as a geek.") Parents have to guide and protect their children. These aren't the kind of influences we're talking about. Right?

Everything Is Influence

Wrong. Everything is influence. Positive or negative, liberating or constricting. Sure, nature provides raw material. And sure, parents' emotions don't determine children's genetic endowments. But parents' **emotional reactions** to nature's provisions shapes what children learn is possible, worthy, worrisome, despicable, dangerous, or lovable in themselves. It seems so obvious it hardly bears repeating. But it's only "obvious" in everyone else's family, not your own.

A lawyer I know, for example, told me that he's sure that he won't influence his daughter's career. "I don't care what she does, as long as she goes to a better college than I did." That meant she'd "better get good grades" and not "waste time on arts and frivolous stuff." How can this father believe his attitudes won't "influence" his daughter? How can he be encouraged to *see* the expectations he is communicating to her? The most direct route to the source of a parent's expectations is to ask *what influence his or her own parents had on career decisions*.

When asked, this father insisted that his parents had no impact whatsoever on his career. "Why, they weren't even around!" he said indignantly. "My parents worked all the time. I was a latchkey kid. They left me to my own devices. I never had anybody to watch out for me or make sure I studied. I watched TV all the time and got mediocre grades. That's why I couldn't get into the best colleges."

Obviously, this man's childhood loneliness and anger at his parents for neglecting him affected him in important ways that now influence his expectations for his daughter (by the way, she is two years old!). He's already worried about her "squandering opportunities." When he looks at his child, he sees a problem in her future that it is his responsibility to "fix" by making sure that she studies the "right" things and earns grades good enough to get into "first rate" colleges. From his point of view, however, not only did his parents not "influence" his career, neither is he influencing his daughter!

Telltale Signs of Hand-Me-Down Dreams Run Amok

How can you tell if *hand-me-down dreams* are the secret source of a parent's worry, preoccupation, or "over involvement" with their child's life? Here are telltale signs.

- **Parents project a problem or emotion** they're experiencing onto the child, and become preoccupied with "fixing" it. They may request or expect teachers or counselors to help them "fix" the "recalcitrant," "defiant," or "lax" child. To "protect" the child from future "mistakes" or suffering the parents regret in their own lives, they wind up "protecting" the child from the freedom and joy of being a child — *i.e.*, playing, exploring, finding out from experience what they love to learn and do.
- **Parents become overinvolved** in school or afterschool activities, as reflected in: *amount of time* invested in the activities; willingness to spare no *expense* and/or to make *material rewards* and often, sadly, *love and warmth*, **contingent** upon participation and level of performance; intense *focus on outcome* (grades or winning) instead of the child's enjoyment or learning. The parent may care more about the activity than the child, and may criticize teachers or coaches who aren't as "serious" about grades or winning. The parents may defend their behavior as "valuing discipline," "preparing the child for the future," "teaching them to compete and succeed in life," etc. The child's enjoyment and spontaneity diminish.
- **Parents show "blind spots"** in self-awareness through glaring contradictions between what they *say they want* and what they actually *ask for* from their children. The contradictions are obvious to others, but denied *as* contradictions by the parents. Reason and insight are overruled by emotional needs. (*e.g.*, "Dana can do whatever she wants, I just want her to see why she's making a bad choice." "Of course, learning is the most important thing, but I know Katy can make straight A's — I always did.")

Dual Vision

To help parents see inside such blind spots, they need **dual vision**. First, they need to *look backward* to see how their educational and career goals were influenced by their own parents' expectations. They need to clarify how these efforts contributed to their choices, disappointments, achievements, and definitions of success or failure. Next, they must look at how these legacies *currently* influence their hopes, expectations, worries, and fears for their own children.

"Nothing," said Carl Jung, "has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent." Many parents intuitively understand this truth. But they may never have *articulated* it, much less applied it themselves. After all, their parents more than likely never *spoke* about it either. No one may have ever asked or been interested in hearing them tell the story of their "unlived" life. Nor has anyone suggested the crucial relevance of this narrative to the example of happiness — of what to expect from life -- they set for their children.

When parents ask you *what can they do to help their children follow their own dreams*, you can suggest that they begin by exploring their *own past dreams and present happiness*. Sometimes the suggestion *alone* nudges people toward breakthrough insights. The idea that working on their *own* happiness is not only important for their own well being, but is crucial for their children's present and future happiness. This process may sound simultaneously both radical and simply, sublimely, timelessly true — albeit forgotten and unexplored. It can provide extraordinary relief from pressures and frustrations for parent and child.

Living "Unlived" Lives

Here are guidelines for what parents can do *for themselves*— *that will free their children to fulfill their own dreams*.

1. IDENTIFY YOUR "UNLIVED" LIFE

You already know what it is. It's wherever you go in fantasy any time your thoughts begin: "What if..." "Some day..." "If I were starting life over..." "If only I'd been born..." (take your pick: *as a man; as a woman; in a different family; in a different time...*). Problems arise when you think of your unlived life as a fantasy, not as a goal for change. It won't do you any good to tell *children* to follow their dreams if you haven't tried to do so yourself. Children carefully observe differences between what you *say* and what you *do*.

2. BEGIN TO LIVE YOUR "UNLIVED" LIFE

You have to begin in small ways to live your "unlived" life. As *soon* as you begin to grapple with your "unlived" life, you transform it into your **lived life**. You don't have to do it all the time. You don't have to be the best. All you have to do -- all your children have to see you do -- is try. Outcome isn't important; effort is.

3. WHAT YOU *CAN'T* LIVE, YOU NEED TO GRIEVE

Although it's never too late to begin anything, it can be too late to begin to be *young*. That doesn't have to stop you from trying, but it does mean you must acknowledge and grieve the time you lost. The purpose of grieving is not to get stuck in regret, but to ensure that you *don't*. If you don't admit your emotions, sadness won't disappear. Your children will detect it and try to heal it. The benefit of sending truly "dead" dreams to the "afterlife" is that it liberates you to devote time and energy to what's possible and real in the present.

You Are Here To Take Care of You

Analyst James Hollis said that he views people as worthy of respect and incarnating a mysterious call, the unfolding of which is the purpose of life. And just so should we treat our children -- worthy of being different, having no obligation to us whatsoever. They are not here to take care of us: we are here to take care of us.

Ultimately, children can only be free and happy when their parents are, too.

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